**Close Reading**

**Reading For a Purpose**  
**Skilled readers do not read blindly, but purposely**. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are reading, determines how they read. They read in different ways in different situations for different purposes. Of course, reading has a nearly universal purpose: ***to figure out what an author has to say on a given subject. It is important teachers know this because often the purpose is not clear to the teacher or for the student.***

When we read, we translate words into meanings. We must take those same words and re-translate them into the author’s original meaning using our own ideas and experiences. Accurately translating words into intended meanings is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled at ‘translation’.

Some of the various purposes for reading include:

1. Sheer pleasure: requires no particular skill level
2. To figure out a simple idea: which may require skimming the text
3. To gain specific technical information: skimming skills required
4. To enter, understand, and appreciate a new world-view: requires close reading skills in working through a challenging series of tasks that stretch our minds
5. **To learn a new subject: requires close reading skills in internalizing and taking ownership of an organized system of meanings**

This last point is relevant to us, as teachers and facilitators. How we read should be determined in part by what we read. Reflective readers read a textbook, for example, using a different mindset than they use when reading an article in a newspaper. Furthermore, reflective readers read a textbook in biology differently from the way they read a textbook in history. (Shanahan, Shanahan 2008). Close reading is a reading skill that needs explicit teaching. All teachers must take responsibility for this.

**The skill of close reading**

**What is close reading?**

The skill called "close reading" is fundamental for interpreting a text. This skill is commonly associated with the teaching of literature (English) where specific Achievement Standards focus on close reading of unfamiliar text. Anecdotal evidence suggests, though, that this skill is not transferred across other subject areas yet this is a very important skill, that of unpacking text then processing information for critical thinking. On the positive side literacy is a focus in schools and good practice (which can be clearly defined) is making a difference. The concern, though, has to do with the ‘next steps’; students still need to learn to read more deeply and process text information (analyse, synthesise, evaluate) as they read and process print in all its forms and content area. **I believe the** **focus of literacy instruction should be a careful examination of the text itself.** This is what students are finding difficult. Working with subject facilitators across curriculum areas, I have found the vast array of texts students are required to understand and critically examine eg in History/Geography there are; maps, graphs, speeches, magazine articles, photos, cartoons, newspaper articles. In PE students are asked to analyse an advertisement, Technology, a newspaper article. Each of these has a format that requires specific practice/teaching. The questions are **do teachers explicitly teach these texts. How do they teach them?**

**Texts should be taught not assigned.** A close reading of text means explicitly teaching students how to read text to determine what the text says. Teachers should not assume that senior students have mastered these formats/genre. Revisiting these text types is important. Close reading is not a skill, which can be developed to a sophisticated extent overnight. It requires a lot of practice in the various linguistic and content/subject areas involved – and it requires that teachers do a lot of reading. The good news is that most people already possess the skills required. They have acquired them automatically through being able to read – even though they have not been conscious of doing so.

"Reading closely “means **developing a deep understanding and a precise interpretation of** **a text that is based first and foremost on the words themselves**. (this is why we need to be looking more closely at texts) But a close reading does not stop there; rather, it embraces larger themes and ideas suggested by the passage itself. We should also distinguish between doing a close reading and writing one. Doing a close reading involves a thought process that moves from small details to larger issues. For writing it is the other way around.

**How to do a close reading**

When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only *selected* features of the text—for instance, particular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step in the process of close reading.

The second step is interpreting your observations. What we are basically talking about here is inductive reasoning: moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations.

**How to Begin: The following are examples of the close reading process.**

**A ------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

The following has been Adapted From Albert Sheen's site at: [http://www.sit.wisc.edu/~aesheen/Eng208-2-1999/closeread1.htm](http://www.sit.wisc.edu/%7Eaesheen/Eng208-2-1999/closeread1.htm)

1. **Getting Started**: Treat the passage as if it were complete in itself. Read it a few times, at least once aloud. Concentrate on all its details and assume that everything is significant.  Determine what the passage is about and try to paraphrase it.  Make sure that you begin with a general sense of the passage’s meaning. Annotate where appropriate. Annotating means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins. When we respond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but we also begin to think with the author about the evidence—the first step in moving from reader to writer.
2. **Word meaning:** Determine the meanings of words and references. Also, note (and verify) interesting connotations of words. ***Look up any words you do not know*** or which are used in unfamiliar ways. (if not done it may result in diminished comprehension.) Consider the language of the passage. What is the source of the language, i.e. Are there any slang words, innuendoes, puns, ambiguities?
3. **Structure:** Examine the structure of the passage. How does it develop its themes and ideas? How is the passage organized? Are there climaxes and turning points?
4. **Sound and Rhythm**: Acquire a feel for the sound, meter, and rhythm; note any aural clues that may affect the meaning. Even punctuation may be significant. Be alert to devices such as alliteration, assonance, and rhyme.
5. **Syntax (word order):** Examine the syntax and the arrangement of words in the sentences. Are the sentences simple or complex? What is the rhythm of the sentences?
6. **Irony:** How does irony operate in the passage, if at all?
7. **Tone and Narrative Voice:** What is the speaker’s (as distinct from the narrator’s and author’s) attitude towards his or her subject. How is this reflected in the tone? What does the passage reveal about the speaker?  Who is the narrator?  What is the relationship between the narrator and the speaker?  Is there more than one speaker?
8. **Imagery**: What sort of imagery is invoked? How do the images relate to those in the rest of the text? How do the images work in the particular passage and throughout the text? What happens to the imagery over the course of the passage? Does the passage noticeably lack imagery? If so, why?
9. **Rhetorical Devices:** Note particularly interesting metaphors, similes, images, or symbols especially ones that recur in the passage or that were important for the entire text. How do they work with respect to the themes of the passage and the text as a whole?
10. **Themes:** Relate all of these details to possible themes that are both explicitly and implicitly evoked by the passage. Attempt to relate these themes to others appearing outside the immediate passage. These other themes may be from the larger story from which the passage is excerpted; or from other tales; or from knowledge about the narrator; or from the work as a whole.

*Note that this process moves from the smallest bits of information (words, sound, punctuation) to larger groupings (images, metaphors) to larger concepts (themes). Also, the final argument is based on these smaller levels of the passage; this is why it is called a close reading.*

**B --------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

1. ***Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.***

**2. *Look for patterns in the things you have noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, and similarities.***

**3. *Ask questions about the patterns you have noticed—especially how and why.***

**C Another perspective ---------------------------------------------------------------------**

According to a definition by Sheron M. Brown*, in Unleash Your Inner Teacher!* Close reading has **five levels** and each level supports students with determining the meaning behind complex texts.

* **The first level involves students paraphrasing the text sentence by sentence.** This means that students engage with a very meaty piece of text and the text is short.  It also means that teachers have to decide on the most important portion of text as it relates to the content they want the students to engage in for the day. At this point of the definition, teachers and leaders tend to respond, “Yes **BUT**, what about my struggling readers? They don’t know the words in the text.” After I ask, “have they been taught the necessary vocabulary,” their answer is a gaze toward the heavens. A lack of understanding of the [academic language](http://www.marzanoresearch.com/research/building_vocabulary.aspx) is one major reason struggling learners struggle. So if your question is how can I get struggling learners to grapple with complex text, one major response is teach them the [vocabulary](http://www.marzanoresearch.com/research/building_vocabulary.aspx) they need.
* The second level of close reading **involves summarizing a piece of text,** paragraph by paragraph. The foundation suggests the following format for summarizing: state your understanding of the text; elaborate on your understanding; provide an example of the meaning of the text; and illustrate the meaning of the text with an analogy or metaphor ([SEEI](http://sheronbrownphd.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/seei.doc)- see attachment). This process sounds rather easy, but actually doing it is a challenge. Nevertheless, it is still a great exercise because it deepens comprehension, improves mental capacity and supports the understanding of concepts that can transfer for later use.
* The third level of close reading **asks the reader to analyse the text**. This analysis follows a structured format. *This can be done with templates, exemplars and modelling.*
* The fourth level of close reading **asks students to evaluate**. Evaluation requires critiquing and/or judging. *Solo taxonomy can assist teachers here. Developing proficiency in this taxonomy takes time, but it’s time well spent. The more you develop as a practitioner in using these tools, the better you’ll become and the better your students will become.*
* The last level of close reading involves **placing yourself in the position of the author.** This level requires students to engage in empathy and to consider another’s perspective by thinking the way the author might think. In order to do this, the reader must have already deeply considered the concepts and perspective of the author.

These models of [close reading](http://sheronbrownphd.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/close_reading.jpg) provide the cognitive scaffolds that students need for success especially at the senior levels of NCEA.